



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY FOR
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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Testimony of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities Before the Appropriations Committee

Presented by; James D. McGaughey
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Good evening. Thank you for this opportunity to share my serious concerns about the impact of proposed reductions in our agency's operating budget on our agency's part of the safety net for people with disabilities in Connecticut. The proposed budget would eliminate four positions – nearly 10% of our staff – and cut close to \$40,000 in funding for contracted advocacy services.

The specific cuts that have been proposed involve a human services advocate position, two community advocacy specialist positions and a secretary, along with \$38,403 in contracting funds. Overall, I believe that the proposed cuts will greatly impact our ability to serve our clients, and will significantly weaken the safety net for people with disabilities. Here is why:

- Eliminating a Human Services Advocate position would mean that 60 fewer people with disabilities would receive extended advocacy representation - representation that could spell the difference between keeping a job or losing it, keeping your housing or losing it, maintaining parental rights or losing them, seeing your child subjected to restraint and seclusion or getting him the types of positive behavioral support programming that can actually head him toward a successful future.
- It would also mean that between 350-450 fewer people with disabilities or their family members could receive timely Information and Referral service – prompt, knowledgeable responses to questions from people who are facing some type of challenge or dilemma in their lives and need to talk with an experienced advisor. (We estimate that this would translate into approximately 20% of first-time callers not receiving initial call-backs for up to 4-5 business days; our current goal is that 97% receive call-backs within one business day, and so far this fiscal year, we are running at close to that mark. These delays become very significant to people who have received some type of official notice and have only a short time to respond, file an appeal, etc.)
- The elimination of two Community Advocacy Specialists (we only have two left; we used to have four) would spell an end to our successful efforts to reach out and offer empowering assistance to minority communities and family advocacy groups. Our community development strategy is based on an awareness that communities have enormous strengths which, if afforded respect, and the type of information, education and concrete assistance they want and ask for, can translate into far more effective locally-based safeguarding than anything the professional staff can ever supply from a single, small State agency in Hartford. Some of the groups these staff members support are

stand-alone organizations, having their own boards and offering help to members of their particular communities. But they are also our partners. The Community Advocacy Specialists support these groups with in-kind help, training, organizing expertise, strategic planning, and, sometimes offers of case assistance (e.g. when they encounter a situation that becomes particularly involved). Most of the people who are assisted would either come directly to our Office for help- adding to our caseload – or, as is more likely to happen, they would not know of any place to turn, and they would simply fall through the cracks.

- Eliminating these positions would mean withdrawing support from community groups and organizations in Norwalk, Danbury, Willimantic, Hartford, New London, Middletown, Norwich, Bridgeport & New Britain. We estimate that up to 1,000 individuals and families are benefitted by organizations we helped to start or are currently helping to get going. If there has ever been a good example of a strategy to “turn the curve”, this is it.
- Losing a secretary position would hurt our ability to cover our reception desk and the work of our Information and Referral unit. Just ensuring that the phone is being answered is important. So is making sure that follow-up correspondence is sent in a timely way and that paperwork necessary for business transactions is completed.
- The loss of nearly \$40,000 in contract money would undermine another of our more successful strategies to expand safeguarding through generic community legal services offices. The contracts that would be cut involve representation of individuals at Southbury Training School, or former residents of Mansfield Training School.
- OPA has already lost nine general fund positions and over \$100,000 in funding for contracts from state and federal sources over the past ten years. Those losses have already translated into reduced capacity (e.g. fewer advocacy and legal cases, fewer investigations). These additional cuts would compound that damage. At some point people just cannot work “harder, faster, longer.” We are already going flat out.

As an independent safeguarding agency, the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities is a vital component in the safety net for people with disabilities. For many people we are the only place they can turn.

Because I believe the consequences of the proposed cuts to our budget would be dire for people with disabilities, and because I view our ability to develop compensatory strategies as extremely limited, I would appreciate an opportunity to meet with our assigned sub-committee to further explain the impact of this proposed budget.